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CONFERENCE SUB THEME: Institutional development

TOPIC: Reworking the quality puzzle in open and distance learning for sustainable development

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TOPIC: Reworking the quality puzzle in open and distance learning for sustainable development**ABSTRACT**

As the open and distance learning quality debate rages on, this study set to rework the quality puzzle in an open and distance learning context for sustainable development. This was a survey of four regional campuses informed by a purposive sample of 284 students and sixty members of staff. Some very glaring quality puzzles were unearthed in this study. Suppressed voices of quality working as change inhibitors are in effect, silent assassins of quality in open and distance learning. There were far more damaging attitudes to quality than those that promote it. Some manifestations of damaging attitudes were seen through the otherness of open and distance universities and their students, the low status accorded to distance education and the belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. The invisible hand of power from a close knit highly conservative old boys' clique from conventional universities became visible in this study. The study concluded that ODL cannot therefore fulfil its purpose of promoting sustainable development without reference to these quality puzzles some of which are inflicting shock and injury to the staff and students. The study thus recommended a re-thinking on conditions heightening quality in an ODL context considering that the quality issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. There is the question of who gets what from the paymaster's limited pot and why (Doherty, 2008).

Reworking the quality puzzle in open and distance learning for sustainable development

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

To Hemmati and Gardiner (2002) education is an essential building block in sustainable development. Indeed, none of the three “pillars” of sustainable development can be achieved without solving the prevailing problem of education inequity. According to Hemmati and Gardiner (2002), the three pillars of sustainable development are:

- **Environmental protection** requires a solid understanding of people's relationship to environmental resources, as well as their rights and roles in resource planning and management. It also requires acknowledgement and incorporation of human's knowledge of environmental matters, as well as an understanding of the specific impacts of environmental degradation and misuse;
- **Economic well-being** requires gender-sensitive strategies. 70 % of the world's estimated 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty are women. Segmentation of labour markets - horizontally and vertically - has only marginally improved. Economic well-being of any society cannot be achieved if one group is massively underprivileged compared to the other. Nor can an economy be called healthy without utilising the contributions and skills of all members of society;
- **Social equity** is fundamentally linked to gender equity. Sexism, racism, discrimination on the grounds of ethnic group, faith, political opinion, social status or sexual orientation are clear indicators of social inequity. No society can survive sustainably, or allow its members to live in dignity, if there is prejudice and discrimination of any social group (Hemmati and Gardiner, 2002, p. 8).

It has to be pointed out that to meet these three pillars of sustainable development, education is the pillar of sustainable development (OUT, 2012) and must be in the fore front. In order to achieve this target, tremendous amount of expansion of higher education would be necessary. However, the prohibitive costs of providing higher education using conventional means are unsustainable especially in developing countries of Africa (Parker, 2009). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) may be a supplementary approach to fulfil the target through its more flexible and liberal yet quality programmes (Gogoi and Hazarika, 2011).

Distance education has been viewed internationally as a viable option for improving access to, and the equity and quality of, basic education in various settings (McQuaide 2009). Thus, distance education programmes are growing. The growth is expected to continue over the next five years with estimates placing the number of students taking online classes in 2014 at over 18.5 million students (Nagel, 2008). Further, distance education is used as a tool to support and supplement conventional educational programmes (Perraton 2000). As Zimbabwe is trying to promote sustainable development, distance education is sufficiently well placed to play a pivotal role in this regard.

Zimbabwe Open University is an open and distance-teaching university established by an act of parliament-the Zimbabwe Open University Act (1999). It started in 1993 as a College of the University of Zimbabwe initially to train teachers and heads of schools in educational management. At its peak, with an enrolment of about 21 000 students (Strategic Plan 2010-2015), it is arguably the second biggest university in Southern Africa after UNISA in terms of student numbers. The university offers various programmes of learning in four faculties. According to Khan (2008), the outcome of higher education translates into the creation of both physical and social capital. To Khan (2008), optimally apportioned quality and quantity of each of the two broad forms of capital ensures sustainable development of a society. The

institutions of higher learning, specifically in the modern world, are universally considered to be the service industries responsible for continuous supply of brains sensitised to the dynamic needs of society to create and reform the physical and social capital (Khan, 2008).

Open Universities the world over are in the business of promoting a paradigm shift in the provision of education (Allen and Seaman 2008; Knowles and Kalata 2007 & Nagel 2009). A good example is the Open University of Indonesia (Universitas Terbuka). In the university's Strategic Plan for 2005-2020, the university set out to expand opportunities for quality higher education throughout the distance education system and produce competent academics and professionals who are able to compete globally (Setijorini and Adnan (2008). Zimbabwe Open University, whose vision is to become a 'world class university', took lessons from the Universitas Terbuka and now accepts that sustainable development is its core business. This is one reason why the university is in the forefront for moving 'knowledge frontiers for sustainable development'. Khan (2008) posits that since the last quarter of 20th century, reformers have universally begun to recognize the uncomfortable reality that social function of higher education has been alarmingly compromised by the failure of the institution to underscore sustainable development.

The Zimbabwe Open University shares some of the concerns of sustainable development and its programmes are geared to support the three pillars of sustainable development discussed elsewhere in this paper. Khan (2008) argues that the time has come for historians to admit that the mass access to formal higher education in the period following World War Two (WWII) appears to have worked as a double edged sword: although accessibility of higher education to masses has led to unprecedented technological growth by uncapping wider human potentialities, the associated developments in sociological and environmental realms have raised serious sustainability issues. Thus, what is needed is a cultural shift towards sustainable development and Zimbabwe Open University is known for having programmes that produce graduates who use innovative and creative methods that will bring about effective changes in the ailing socio-political system for sustainable development (Chiome, 2011b). ZOU also intends to produce graduates with capacity to manage change and compete on the global arena (ZOU, 2010). However, the role of the Zimbabwe Open University appears to be blurred in this area as the skills, knowledge and attitudes used by these critical professionals need to be appreciated. Society need to acknowledge that quality and sustainable development are some of the core values of an open and distance learning university.

Zambia has also made strides in changing the education landscape by reaching disadvantaged communities through distance education. However, a study by Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) unearthed constraints and impediments in the way. It then recommended that there is an urgent need to, among other things provide training in all aspects of open and distance learning through short courses and degree programmes and periodically evaluate open and distance learning programmes to improve their quality and ensure that they are responsive to emerging needs such as sustainable development. This research in another sense, interrogated quality of open and distance learning to unearth missing links associated with sustainable development. Open and distance learning need to produce quality products that are competitive on the world stage and can lead transformation and sustainable development (Siaciwena and Lubinda 2008; Gogoi and Hazarika, 2011). These important points raised by Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) in the context of the Zambian experience must be used as a guiding torch by the Zimbabwe Open University in its quest to produce quality graduates

with capacity to lead sustainable development. The uses of open and distance learning for sustainable development in developing countries is an under-researched and under-reported area (Perraton, 1997). Most international attention has been focused on open universities providing higher education. Against this backdrop, this research set forth to rework the quality puzzle in open and distance learning in order to move frontiers for sustainable development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study set to rework the quality puzzle in open and distance learning for sustainable development.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This research has been guided by the question:

Is open and distance education in Zimbabwe sufficiently well placed to provide quality education for sustainable development?

METHODOLOGY

This research was a survey of four regional campuses of the Zimbabwe Open University. It was informed by a purposive sample of 284 students and sixty members of staff. An open ended questionnaire was used to gather qualitative data. Thus, this research is in the qualitative paradigm.

RESULTS

This study unearthed suppressed voices of quality working as silent assassins of both quality and sustainable development. These are discussed below.

Suppressed voices working as silent assassins of quality

An interesting finding of the study is that 53 (88%) staff and 230 (81%) student respondents believe that there are suppressed voices in open and distance learning that negatively affects quality. The resultant responses appeared to be too loud to ignore since what is perceived as lack of quality in the Zimbabwe Open University may be nothing more than damaging attitudes towards open and distance learning. The study resulted in unearthing some major missing links that appeared to be suppressed voices of quality in ODL. These act as sustainable development inhibitors. They have been labelled *silent assassins of quality and sustainable development* by one respondent. Their direct consequence according to the other respondent is the *stead loss of motivation to improve quality and sustainable development in an open and distance learning context*.

Entrenched mental models: Damaging attitudes towards ODL

An important finding from 200 (70%) of students and 50 (83%) of staff unearthed by this study was the damaging attitudes towards ODL. These were seen as affecting values and practices in the university. There were far more damaging attitudes to quality than those that promote it. These statements were extracted from the questionnaires and may be just a tip of the ice bag:

The need is there to change attitudes values and practices that have become reutilised.

Some damaging attitudes are destroying the image of the university. These must be discarded.

Research has shown that on average, most countries allocate just 0,002 of their national budget to ODL despite the great strides it has made in increasing access to quality education across the globe (Siaciwena, 2011). Kleijnen et al, (2011) opines that quality management is a delicate process that is subject to competing values and strong ambivalences. In this regard, its effects in terms of improvement of educational quality are controversial.

The otherness of open and distance learning

The otherness of open and distance learning, its students and its staff is damaging all the very good work that is going into quality and sustainable development in an open and distance education context [34 staff (57%) and 119 students (42%)]. Faced with this kind of construction, one regional campus in this study lost 15 (60%) of staff to a conventional university in a space of two years. They left an open and distance teaching university not because there was no quality but in order to shrug off the otherness tag hovering over open and distance learning institutions. Only one staff member who was on a temporary contract in the conventional university transferred in the opposite direction. Thus, respondents in this study agreed that:

There appears to be construction of ODL as other; construction of the staff in ODL as other and construction of the students in ODL as other.

From these findings, it means that society that is looking at ODL to lead sustainable development is instead confronted and experiencing steady loss of motivation to improve quality and sustainable development. Society cannot trust ODL to lead sustainable development when there appears to be manifestations of construction of the ODL system, the staff in ODL and ODL students as other. Siaciwena (2011) agrees and says ODL is considered inferior in most circles and for this reason it is under-funded. As Law (1997) argues, distance learning may seem to offer attractive short-term gains – but student success and course/institutional credibility rest on the resolution of fundamental and longer-term quality issues such as the otherness tag hovering above ODL.

The otherness of ODL emanates from conservatives who fail to appreciate that learning paradigms are changing. Brown (2006) posits that learning paradigms are already starting to shift beyond the changes experienced in the 20th century in terms of the role of teaching and learning. While the role of the teacher first shifted from “teaching” to “learning facilitation”, the latest shift is towards “facilitated and supported enquiry”. Soloway (2003), for example, argues that inquiry into authentic questions generated from student experiences is now the central strategy for teaching. Therefore contemporary educational paradigms where ODL is in the driving seat focus not only on the production of knowledge, but are beginning to focus more and more on the effective application/integration/manipulation/etc. of existing information and knowledge (Brown, 2006). Unfortunately this has not been the case in this study where ODL is being sidelined in favour of conventional systems.

In a study in India by Gogoi and Hazarika (2011) some interesting findings on awareness of the college students on different aspects of ODL were deduced from the data. Only 12% of the respondents agreed that the degrees awarded by ODL institutions and those by the conventional institutions are equivalent. Majority of the respondents (about 70%)

opined that the students who pass through conventional mode get priority in the job market. About 57% of the respondents agreed that only non-meritorious students go for distance education. With this kind of thinking, quality in ODL may be a different battle field altogether. This seems so since Hunt (1998) posits that in 1998 distance learning at Sheffield University was at that time struggling to establish its respectability as a field of academic study arguing that the process and context of study form part of the content of study, and personal development is a stated aim. Thus, the introduction of the course was clearly politically and academically significant, with financial considerations a poor second.

This otherness appears to be discrimination which may be a monster under the bed that impinges on quality efforts in an ODL context. After all, generally speaking, quality is a matter of negotiation between the different stakeholders or parties concerned about the expectations and requirements, which is a fitness for the purposes which are most frequently defined in terms of criteria related to academic standards, financial effectiveness, and social usefulness (Tarawneh, 2011).

The most detrimental part was that of *the otherness of the university* coming from society. There are also researchers who argue that while universities can and do make a difference in terms of quality and sustainable development, what they can achieve is partial and limited because educational institutions are also part of the wider society, subject to its norms, rules and influences (Mortimore, 1997). In some studies in schools, Reynolds and Packer (1992) painted a gloomier picture when they alleged that schools have an independent of only 8-15% on student outcomes. Modern science in early modern Europe was born not without a struggle (Giddy, 2012). Thus, with this kind of thinking, if societal attitudes are not addressed then addressing the issue of sustainable development through ODL is still far from being settled despite internal efforts to the contrary. The poor attitudes students may have towards distance education could be addressed through sensitisation, orientation, and the provision of tool kits that help users to study at a distance (Chiome, 2011a). Prospective students must be informed that distance education is not easy; rather, it requires self-discipline. The public-at-large could be informed about the benefits of distance education in spearheading sustainable development. It is not only cost-effective but also enables people to study where they live and to contribute to their families and communities as they study (Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010). In the words of Mbizvo (2011) 'ODL has a distinct advantage in that it reaches out to all levels of society and tackles geographical challenges in education' (Mbizvo, 2011, p. 5)

The otherness of the students in ODL

The otherness of the students of open and distance learning appears to affect quality and sustainable development [34 staff (57%) and 119 students (42%)]. Students even voiced concern that they are being ignored in important government programmes. They cited the following:

There are no H.I.V. and Aids grants from the government, the National Aids Council nor the Non Governmental Organisations for distance education students.

There are no student loans and grants for us as ODL students. It appears as though some universities are using political clout to get advantages that are unavailable to competitors.

The computerisation programme by His Excellence got the rounds in all universities, teachers colleges and secondary schools except ours.

It appears as though some universities are using political clout to get advantages that are unavailable to the ODL systems. Ural (2007) says students in his study do not have clear views about the concept of independent learning and they seem to be distant to the thought that distance education encourage students to become self-planning and independent learning type students. The findings of the study show that the students do not feel very enthusiastic about being sidelined in important programmes by the state and other players. This may explain the otherness of distance education students.

One touching example that was given was that the Ministry of Education at one time instructed all its arms that no graduate with a degree in educational management from an ODL institution is eligible to apply for the Education Officer post. One student complained:

How on earth can a graduate in Physics or Shona or Religious Education for that matter out-compete me to become my Provincial Education Director (PED)? Where did that person learn about performance management, staff development, strategic planning and so forth?

Another one shared this secret:

A whole intake of a Masters degree in public health at a local conventional university had its offer letters withdrawn after the vice-chancellor discovered that 12 out of 15 of the successful applicants were ODL graduates.

The other one wrote:

I do not understand if they say my educational planning, measurement and evaluation and supervision of educational personnel is not enough to make me an education officer!

The others also questioned why qualifications were so downgraded by individuals without through knowledge of ODL. What appears missing in these silent assassins of quality in ODL is the fact that much of the e-learning 2.0 movement is geared to affordances of new technologies and software for such purposes as providing full and flexible access to a global network of resources delivered onto the desktops and laptops of students and faculty (Doiron and Asselin, 2011). What they do not know is that models such as learning commons spaces, collaboratories, and virtual learning communities springing up in various guises, indicate that learning in tertiary institutions has reached a point of no return in its transformation (Barone, 2005). Society need to understand that the cumulative advances and innovations in digital technologies coupled with the evidence that learners entering tertiary education today have changed fundamentally in their learning needs/styles (Rowlands and Nicholas, 2008). This should be enough evidence to awaken us to the realities of new learning landscapes which are emerging around us (Clark, Logan, Mee and Oliver, 2009). Thus, it may be hard to accept but it is the reality that as the first generation to have grown up always having the Internet, new

media, and access to many learning opportunities, today's educators are faced with growing evidence that the traditional methods of teaching and learning are disconnected from current student motivations and learning styles (Doiron and Asselin, 2011). It should be made clear that while universities look toward the horizon for direction in digital learning environments (Johnson, Levine, Smith and Stone, 2010); students in open and distance learning are living these trends (Kanwar, 2011).

Life in a marginalised university

Several respondents in this study [131 (46%) of students and 43 (72%)] lamented the kind of life they lived in what one respondent labelled *a marginal university*. Another respondent indicated that her parents had pre-conceptions regarding distance education. She indicated that:

'They consistently discouraged me telling me to go to a better conventional university.'

Another respondent who is a PhD student said she failed to get a PhD place at a prominent conventional university where her husband is teaching. The reason given by the husband was that:

'You are a product of an upper top.' Apparently 'upper top' refers to rural day secondary schools that are notorious for sub standard education brought about by lack of adequate educational resources. The following excerpt from the questionnaire sums this issue:

ODL is certain to fail to impart skills, knowledge and attitudes towards sustainable development if left on the periphery and treated as a marginal activity.

What these highly acclaimed professionals fail to appreciate is that the world is moving from knowledge management to sense making. According to Brown, (2006) an emerging paradigm shift within management and information sciences suggests that the focus should in future shift from knowledge management to sense making. Snowden (2005, p. 16) describes sense making as:

...the way that humans choose between multiple possible explanations of sensory and other input as they seek to conform the phenomenological with the real in order to act in such a way as to determine or respond to the world around them.

He then continues to say that sense making is about ensuring cognitive effectiveness in information processing in order to gain a cognitive edge or advantage. This trend makes a lot of sense when we think about the difficulties we all experience in our daily work and life due to the abundance of information and interaction that requires us to apply new skills in order to manage our environments meaningfully (Brown, 2006).

Deep-seated prejudices against distance education

This study further unearthed that there are deep-seated prejudices against distance education curtailing its capacity to spearhead sustainable development [(staff, 37 (62 %) and students 150; (53%)]. These then cascades to students and staff. Some supporting statements were:

The association of distance education with the less privileged contribute considerably to its low status in university rankings.

The low status of distance education is demonstrated as much by its absence from some universities as by its presence in others.

In terms of funding, ODL is neglected. It is accorded inferior status.

If sustainable development is taught through ODL, it will be relegated to the domain of inferior education.

These assertions that all the work to spruce up sustainable development through ODL is seen as peripheral activities were damaging all the good work going on. The low status given to distance education emanates from the fact that many people fail to appreciate what it really is. According to Moore (1997) it has been pointed out that in any educational programme, even in face-to-face education, there is some transactional distance. Seen in this way, distance education is a subset of the universe of education, and distance educators can draw on, and contribute to, the theory and practice of conventional education. Nevertheless, in what we normally refer to as distance education, the separation of teacher and learner is sufficiently significant that the special teaching-learning strategies and techniques they use can be identified as distinguishing characteristics of this family of educational practice (Moore, 1997). Furthermore, according to Ural (2007) campus-based traditional universities have difficulty in providing a good quality education due to overcrowded classrooms. As a result, to lighten the capacity load of traditional universities, distance education lectures can be part of the solution (Ural, 2007). Gogoi and Hazarika (2011) further point out that it has been found in their study in India that the present scenario of the level of awareness and attitude of the college students towards ODL system is not very encouraging. Unless the students are aware about the merits and accessibility of the ODL system and form a healthy attitude towards it, it will not be possible to attain equity and access of the higher education, which is the need of the hour (Gogoi and Hazarika, 2011).

Learning equals face to face interaction

The assertion that how can a teaching/ learning process that deviates so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years embody quality education?' (American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 2000:7) was also confirmed in this study [(27 staff 45% and 148 students 52%)], if these statements are anything to go by.

There are still people who believe that learning is like a person standing in front of a room stuffing information into students like grain into a hen.

Some people laughed at me thinking that to learn is the same as spoon feeding.

My friends think face to face is the best way of learning. They say there are too many possibilities, too little time and too little investments in distance education that will not match the same time same place initiatives.

As respondents in this study grapples with the acceptance of the teaching of sustainable development through ODL, others elsewhere have seen the light. For instance Brown (2006) posits that new information technologies, and particularly the Internet, are dramatically

transforming access to information, are changing the learning and research process. New information technologies have transformed how we search, discover, teach and learn. On the other hand, Restak (2003, p. 57) points out that, within the modern age, we must be able to rapidly process information, function amidst chaotic surroundings, always remain prepared to shift rapidly from one activity to another and redirect attention between competing tasks without losing time.

The need to promote learner centered education and sustainable development becomes imperative. According to Brown (2006), a distinction between teacher-centeredness and learner-centeredness lies in the responsibility accepted for the learner's learning process and learning achievement. In a teacher-centered paradigm which is characteristics of face-to face engagements, the teacher accepts this responsibility. Opposed to that, in a learner-centered education paradigm that ODL need to promote in teaching sustainable development, the learner accepts the full responsibility for his/her own learning. It is for this reason that self-directed learning plays such an important role in effective learner- centered education system that is characteristic of ODL institutions. Note however, that according to Brown (2006), this does not mean that the teacher or educational institution has no responsibility. The focus shifts towards the instructional design of a conducive learning environment, in which effective learning can take place. The learning equal face-to-face mentality has been rebuked by Doiron and Asselin (2011) who posit that youth growing up during the past few years have had unique experiences and cultural influences such that they may have developed methods of learning out of step with how we traditionally structure and provide education in situations where access to digital technologies is more common and more deeply penetrated throughout the whole society.

Old boys' network's invisible hand of power that became visible

The old boys' network from conventional universities uses its invisible hand of power to fuel the damaging attitudes towards distance education. This network is too conservative to accept that learning for sustainable development is no longer associated with spoon feeding but that open and distance mode is the new thing [33 staff (55%) and 196 students (69%)]. Some of the substantiating statements are:

The belief that distance education is part time learning and not full time is putting breaks on quality. They prescribe outmoded business and administrative systems. Politics and priorities in higher education are based on the conventional universities' prescriptions. Same set of people make the rules of the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects.

ODL must contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by some conventional institutions code named block releases. These are poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and minimal student support. They are merely used as cash cows to subsidise on campus operations.

The old boys' network appears to have an invisible hand of power. Power is intimately tied to knowledge, to the discourse of education and learning, and the production of truth, myths or deceptions (Foucault, 1980). To Foucault (1980), power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. The same set of people makes the rules of

the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects (Minocha, 2009). It means to say ZOU must contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by some conventional institutions code named block releases. Block-releases have been labelled by respondents in this study as *poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and minimal student support that are merely used as cash cows to subsidise on-campus operations*. The truth of the matter is that the old boys must come to grips with the fact and reality that “new learners” (Gapp and Fisher, 2006) need to be better prepared to live and work in a digital world and that educators need to be careful that education does not remain “fixed in monomodal instruction with homogenised lesson plans, curriculum, and pedagogy . . .” (Kellner, 2004, p. 14). As a result, the literature on quality and sustainable development through distance education is, “like the practice, scarce, scattered, buried and extremely diverse” (Yates, cited in Perraton 1997). Dodd’s (cited in Chiome, 2011a) appeal that the urgency of the governments to seek ways to harness the powers of distance learning which are becoming internationally recognised for higher levels of education seems to have been ignored. This adversely affects dissemination of information on sustainable development.

Shock and injury resulting from differing constructions of reality

An important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. These assertions from one part-time academic appear to support this kind of experience:

I had delivered one of the best lectures one day basing on my own judgment. I felt at the time that I had given my best and felt that I was succeeding as a distance educator. However, I experienced the shock of my life to hear that the students went to the Regional Director to complain that they were so frustrated by my presentation that they wanted to drop out! I was actually hurt and frustrated that I nearly dropped out of the system myself. So what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counted as success for me was seen as dismal failure by the students.

This important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. However, one respondent shot down this and reasoned that what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counts as success for one person can be seen as dismal failure by another. What is needed in this case is what some respondents in this study called *image building*.

Binsardi and Ekwulugo, (2003)’s findings that universities must seek to re-position themselves in order to improve their image and reputation was collaborated in this research in which ODL’s image was dealt a severe blow by damaging attitudes. The meaning of marketing has evolved over time but the most enduring theme in these developments has been the centrality of the customer in the decisions of the organisation (Maringe, 2005). Marketing is a term that describes any exchange relationship to ensure that parties in this relationship derive the maximum benefit from the exchange. Institutions however differ in the extent to which they conceptualise and implement the marketing idea and ODL appears

to blame for this deterioration in its image. The product orientation concept adopted by Kotler in Maringe (2005) can minimise the damage. Kotler quoted in Maringe (2005) considers product orientation as being driven by a need to offer the highest quality, performance and innovative features. Universities all over the world pride themselves in being excellent at what they do and in delivering quality products and programmes of the highest standards (Anderson, 2006 and AAU, 2009). Unfortunately, standards for this quality and excellence are usually internally determined and assumed to be what the customers want or need (Fuller, and Smith, 1991; Lomas, 2007 and Maguad, 2010). Lessons from this study point to a paradigm shift in this regard.

Brown's (2006) advice to ODL institutions that they should move away from providing content per se to learners but should focus on coaching learners to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate information and knowledge, to integrate this knowledge in their world of work and life, to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others may appear farfetched but is relevant to ODL institutions if they are to claim their rightful place. Learners should be connected and networking in various ways in the digital age. Thus, in this regard, Gogoi and Hazarika (2011)'s advice that the funding authorities may allot a sizeable amount of fund for promoting ODL among people, and that the ODL institutions should also spend a portion of their earning for making the people aware and developing a healthy attitude in them. Highlights of the achievements of the students of ODL system should receive serious attention in sustainable development.

Knowledge power struggles

A major finding of this study and one with the most far reaching consequences for quality is the struggle for knowledge power that has affected quality for sustainable development through ODL [125 students (44%) and 31 staff (52%)]. It has been seen that knowledge is a critical component of societal interaction. This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge. The definition and organisation of knowledge in society is a consequence of the distribution of power in that society. Some of the revelations from those that are privy to the debate are:

If knowledge is power as is said, then it follows that some forms of knowledge are more powerful than others. It is no accident that the least powerful forms of knowledge are those taught to the least valued groups in society and are those associated with open and distance learning.

In our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. To sustain development, ODL must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle. In this case, the quality that you are looking for will always be there but with a question mark.

To add assault to injury, a student quoted one prominent academic who once publicly declared that:

'In Zimbabwe there are only two universities-the University of Zimbabwe and others.'

Apparently in reality, Zimbabwe had more than a dozen universities when this statement was made by those with the power to label and go on to make sure that the label sticks! It is clear that the people with influence and power tend to define their own knowledge as superior and then go further to institutionalise it in the education system (Foucault, 1980 and Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). They will measure educational quality in terms of this definition. In this way, power and privilege remain within the same social group (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge.

This is so because respondents in this study believed that in our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. To sustain development, ODL must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle and sustainable development will remain a pipe dream. In this case, the quality for sustainable development that this study was seeking will always be there but with a question mark! According to Harvey and Newton (2004, p. 157), quality has “contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience”. Negative effects emerge from a strong emphasis on external control and overestimating accountability. In this regard, this might provoke a shift of power from the departments to the institutional level and to government (Newton, cited in Kleijnen, et al, 2011).

The bone of hegemony in respect of knowledge is the exercise of power over what counts as knowledge (Doherty, 2008). It is very well gnawed. The same is true of quality. Quality is taken as a status game in the academia world. Most players will adopt the stance that the superiority of academic values over market values is a given, so that the application of a market-derived methodology to academia will have negative effects – more or less by definition. Cartwright (2007, p. 290) claims that, because of the QA agenda “sickness or pathology” has “befallen” academia. Staying with this confusion of methodology with values, one could equally argue that sociologists, Marxist literary critics and other writers have enjoyed excellent profits from the “theory” business for a couple of generations and, as a result, “sickness or pathology” has befallen the discipline of quality (Doherty, 2008). The most important thing to note is that the quality issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. There is the question of who gets what from the paymaster’s limited pot and why (Doherty, 2008). Paymasters generally expect to gain satisfaction from what they are paying for. In principle, it matters little whether the paymaster is the parent, the employer, the student or the government. The argument is the same, it is the exercise of power on what counts as knowledge and what counts as quality. What people involved in the power struggles fail to appreciate is the fact that they inflict untold shock and injury to both staff and students in open and distance learning.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) maintained that special instructional design and communication procedures can overcome barriers of distance in education and promote individualised instruction and improved satisfaction with distance education. They proposed a definition of distance education that places increased emphasis on the organisation and design of distance education:

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result it requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other

technology, as well as special organisational and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2).

Thus, in distance education, there is need to consider Louis and her colleagues (cited in Hayes, at. al., 2004) who argue that reform proposals over emphasise the structural elements of restructuring and overlook the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in learning institutions which are as critical to the success of any change agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

In contemporary times, the individuals and communities have access to both formal and informal stocks of social capital. In the world of antiquity, majority of people counted more on informal stock of social capital like family support and communal networks. This is where ODL comes in to utilise technological advances in communication and transportation in order to increasingly help frame and enforce formal laws of sociology and glued scattered communities for sustainable development. However, there is looming threat to sustainable development that was unearthed in this study. Suppressed voices of quality in ODL are working as sustainable development inhibitors. In effect, they are silent assassins of quality for sustainable development. There are far more damaging attitudes to quality for sustainable development through ODL than those that promote it. Some of the manifestations of these damaging attitudes were seen through the otherness of ODL and its students, the low status accorded to distance education and the belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. The invisible hand of power from a close knit highly conservative old boys' clique from conventional universities appeared visible in this study. In consequence, factors such as these not only influence the working and learning environment of ODL staff and students but simultaneously become the subject of their study. ODL cannot therefore fulfil its purpose – i.e. its quality is not measurable – without reference to these factors some of which are inflicting shock and injury to the staff and students. That said, a hoodwinked approach to economic imperatives may seriously undermine the groundwork for sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the fore going conclusions, this research proffered the following recommendations:

- The main recommendation of this study is that there is need to revisit and for *reworking the quality puzzle for sustainable development through ODL* before it reaches a plateau.
- Quality must be understood as continuous workflows oriented to taking decisions to improve the situation and that enthusiasm and passion for excellence are more predictors of success in quality than do inspections. Enthusiasm overrides barriers to innovation adoption.
- Policy makers at both national and institutional levels must have a keen interest in developing a level playing field in matters affecting both distance and campus based learning.
- ODL institutions must seek to re-position themselves in order to improve their image and reputation
- ODL institutions should move away from providing content per se to learners. For sustainable development, they should focus on coaching learners to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate information and knowledge, to integrate this knowledge in

their world of work and life, to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others.

- Funding authorities need to allot a sizeable amount of fund for promoting sustainable development through ODL among people.
- To sustain development, ODL institutions should spend a portion of their earning for making the people aware and developing a healthy attitude in them.
- Highlights of the achievements of the students of ODL system in sustainable development should receive serious attention in ODL institutions.
- Special instructional design and communication procedures for sustainable development can overcome barriers of distance in education and promote individualised instruction and improved satisfaction with distance education.
- ODL ought to be a major force in society not only for producing leaders in science and technology, but also for downstream channelling of progressive social, moral, and political values while keeping in perspective temporal realities and spatial constraints. This is a healthy situation for sustainable development.

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